MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 012 CS 206 005

AUTHOR Long, Russell C.
TITLE Common Features of Writing and Oral Reading: Implications and Applications.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 22p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Ability; College Students; Comprehension; Higher Education; *Individual Differences; *Oral Reading; *Pronunciation; *Punctuation; Reading Research; Writing Instruction; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills; Written Language

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to test the proposition that the act of oral reading would be significantly different between competent and incompetent writers and the corollary proposition that the act of oral reading closely approximates the act of writing. A writing sample was devised that included three major features: all the common marks of punctuation in their ordinary applications, a variety of syntactic structures, and a wide range of diction. Three groups of readers, a group of faculty members, a group of college freshman students who had indicated writing competency, and a group of freshman students who had indicated a lack of writing competency, were identified. The subjects were asked to read the passage aloud without reviewing it first. Identifiable differences in performance included difference in reading rate with a slower average for the low group, differences in pauses in response to punctuation with the low group having more additional pauses and more deletions, and difference in pronunciation with a higher total of mispronounced words in the low group. Results indicated that the competent writer writes in the same way he or she reads aloud. (MKM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell C. Long
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Russell C. Long

ED196012

Common Features of Writing and Oral Reading: Implications and Applications

It is, and has long been, obvious that an organic relationship exists between the ability to read and the ability to write. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., for instance, has remarked that no one can write better than he can read. It also seems to be true, as Elizabeth Haynes pointed out in 1978, that "there exists some amount of research which indicates that students improve their writing by reading."[1] While this connection would seem to be such a common sense one that it scarcely bears further investigation, a careful examination of the precise nature of the common features of the two activities might very well lead to two useful ends: a diagnostic tool to use with basic writers and an efficacious approach to the correction of basic writing problems.

As I have reviewed diagnostic instruments--both commercially and individually prepared--designed for use with basic writing students, I have been impressed by two features which consistently appear. The first is the thoroughness with which proofreading skills are tested. The second is the skill with which an individual course of remediation can be developed by a trained interpreter of test results. What I find less

CS 206 005

impressive is the rather common conviction that the student who has failed, for instance, to master the conventions of proper comma usage needs, after twelve or more years of obviously fruitless explanation and drill, another semester of explanation and drill. This assumption seems to suggest either (1) that prior explanation and drill has not, indeed, occurred, or (2) that my explanation and drill will be far superior to any before encountered. The first suggestion is rather naive, the second rather hubristic. A third deep assumption is that good writers write as they do because they have studied "the rules" more assiduously than have poor ones. I would like to propose that all three, but particularly the third, may not only be false but counterproductive, at least in the context of achieving minimal writing competency.

In a 1967 article in a popular periodical, John Holt discusses what he feels is a popular misconception about vocabulary "building": that students learn new words consciously and deliberately rather than by experiencing them in various contexts and gradually coming to valid conclusions about their meanings and uses. He points out, quite accurately, that the bulk of all our vocabularies is acquired through contextual association rather than through active searchings through dictionaries.[2] If we were to extend this observation to other conventions of language usage, what would we find? Let us look first at the

underpinnings of traditional instruction in the proprieties of written language.

All specific instruction in written communication is a tacit agreement with E. D. Hirsch's observation that "writing is a form of speech having its own special requirements."[3] Recognizing the obvious impossibility of studying every bit of writing that has been or could be produced, writing instruction usually takes the form of examining samples of extant product, looking for repeated and repeatable patterns, formulating "rules" which purport to "govern" these occurrences, and then drilling beginning writers until they can make a statement of the rules and can, with some degree of accuracy (70%? 80%?), successfully imitate the pattern identified in the original occurrence. Seen from this perspective, many of the problems attendant upon writing instruction can immediately be predicted: the choice of product models, the accuracy of the rules which describe the behavior, the choice of terms in which the descriptions are couched, the proper approach to product imitation, even the acceptable degree of success of imitation. As absorbing as such controversies may become in their own right, their most important effect may have been to obscure our view of the wasted motion in the process itself. Robert Zoellner, in 1969, suggested that as teachers of writing our focus upon product, rather than process, has been a mistake.[4] However, his solution was the provision of visual

models of writing for our students; there is, it seems to me, an alternate approach.

If the contextual paradigm of vocabulary acquisition is extended to the acquisition of the "special requirements" of written language, this would suggest that such requirements are learned through reading rather than through rule study or through observation of the writing process. Furthermore, if this conclusion is valid, there should be significant, observable differences in the reading behaviors of competent and incompetent writers. Finally these differences should be manifest in the act of reading, not in interpretation or recall--the skills measured by most reading tests. This would seem to mean that the student's oral reading performance is, then, what must be observed. A corollary proposition would be that the act of reading orally closely approximates the act, not the product, of writing. In the spring of 1980 I attempted to test these theses.

I first devised a writing sample that included three major features: it used all the common marks of punctuation in all their ordinary applications (commas used, for instance, to set off introductory elements, to separate items in a series, to set off non-restrictive modifiers, etc.); it used a variety of syntactic structures (active and passive voices, high and low tension sentences, sentences of varying length); and it exhibited a wide range of diction. My objective was not to measure the

readers' ability to identify main ideas, but to observe their ability to successfully manage the peculiar requirements of written language; consequently, the passage, although entirely coherent, made no great contribution to Western thought. It was 170 words in length, contained seven sentences ranging from two to sixty words with an average length of about twenty-eight words (four ranged from nineteen to twenty-three) with a thirty-seven word sentence containing a twenty-one word direct quotation. There were twenty-eight marks of punctuation used in fourteen different ways (this includes end marks). I attempted to avoid alliteration and difficult sound combinations. In short, although it was designed to contain certain features fairly compactly, it was a typical sample of "mature" prose style which took a skilled reader about sixty-four seconds to read aloud.

Next, I identified three groups of readers: a control group made up of faculty members, all having the Ph.D. and all published writers whom I used to establish norms of pronunciation and responses to marks of punctuation; a group of freshman sutdents who had indicated writing competency by scoring above 50 on the TSWE and making a grade of B or above in their first semester of freshman composition (the high group); and a group of freshman students who had indicated a lack of writing competency by scoring 25 or below on the TSWE, failing the first semester of freshman composition, being enrolled in a Basic

Writing course, or all three (the low group).

The members of each group were tested in the same manner. Each was taken to a quiet office containing only two chairs, a desk, and a tape recorder. The tester read each the same instructions, gave the subject the typed passage, and, without reviewing the passage, the subject read it aloud. All the subjects were paid volunteers who were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Following the completion of the collection of the reading responses, I began to analyze the data.

Obviously I was concerned with identifiable differences in performance between the high and low groups using the control group as a norm. Several of these were immediately apparent. The first was simply the rate at which the passage was read. The readers in the control group took from 58.30 to 71.90 seconds to complete their reading, and their average reading time was 64.9 seconds which means that they were, on the average, reading at a rate of 2.62 words per second. The high group ranged in total reading time from 57.8 to 80.6 seconds with an average time of 65.87 seconds and an average reading rate of 2.58 words per second--very nearly the same rate as the control group. The low group ranged in total time from 59.2 to 114.7 seconds with an average time of 82.03 seconds and an average reading rate of 2.07 words per second--a significantly lower average than either the control group or the high group.

While this experiment was not principally designed to test reading speed (in fact, the readers were instructed to read at "a normal speed"), the degree of variance between the low and nigh groups would seem to indicate considerably more fluidity in the high group. However, such apparent skill differentiations--taken alone--could be quite misleading. For instance, ignoring either end or internal marks of punctuation would increase reading speed but would have a seriously adverse effect upon the sense of the content. Additionally, blithe mispronunciation as opposed to careful attempts to correctly pronounce unfamiliar words would inaccurately distort the reading rate-reading sense relationship. Consequently, I attempted to correlate the responses of the test groups and the control group to marks of punctuation and to problems of pronunciation.

The control group responded to marks of punctuation--both end and internal--with nearly perfect accord. They used the twenty-eight marks of punctuation to divide the passage into twenty-two smaller sense units (a sense unit meaning here a sequence of words preceded and followed by an identifiable pause), and they reacted uniformly to different uses of the same mark of punctuation: for instance, quotation marks around titles, identifying direct quotations, and stressing meaning reversal or ironic intent of individual words brought different, but uniform, responses--no pause, pause, and no pause

respectively (stress was also, of course, influenced by punctuation, but this was not a point of consideration). This measurement is an obvious attempt to identify the ways in which skilled readers use marks of punctuation--one of the most easily distinguishable features of written language--as guides to meaning. The near perfect uniformity of the control group's response suggests, of course, that knowledgeable responses to conventions of punctuation are highly predictable, which is the other, often ignored, side of our attempts to teach our students such conventions.

As I compared the responses to marks of punctuation of the test groups with the responses of the control group, two areas of variation were identified. The first was the addition of pauses; in effect, adding marks of punctuation to the text and creating smaller sense units. The second was the deletion, or ignoring, of marks of punctuation as guides to sense. While both types of occurrence appeared in the readings of each group, there were significant differences between the two. The high group had a higher degree of agreement of reaction to the control group (95.45% median agreement), fewer additional pauses (an average of five), and fewer deletions (an average of 1.9) than did the low group (87.19%, 9.8, and 2.8 respectively.) Let us consider the nature of these changes separately.

The addition of pauses to a text read orally can occur for several reasons: first, the reader may react differently than the writer to optional punctuation positions (after a short introductory phrase, for instance); second, the reader may pause at the end of a line of text, particularly if the line has contained no mark of punctuation; third, the reader may hesitate before attempting to pronounce an unfamilar word; fourth, the reader may realize he has already made an error or pronunciation and pause while he recognizes the true context (having used one pronunciation of tear, for example, only to recognize shortly that the other is demanded by the context). The first of these does little violence to the sense of the text; however, the second, third, and fourth--particularly the third--can adversely affect sense. Even these, though, result primarily in an awkward, halting performance. It is interesting to note that the first type of additional pause was characteristic of the high group, while the latter three--especially the second and third--were more characteristic of the lower group.

The second type of change, deleting extant marks of punctuation, occurred less frequently than addition in both groups. There are obviously two categories of deletion: end marks and internal marks. Of the two, probably the greatest damage to sense is done by omitting an end mark; this never happened in the high group, but did with some frequency in the low. In both

groups there was some difficulty with the internal punctuation in high tension sentences, but the high group dealt with these much more successfuly than the low group.

The third general area of comparison was agreement in pronunciation. Fine distinctions in pronunciation, regional stress patterns, etc., were ignored--any close approximation to the general pronunciation of the word was accepted as correct. Again there was a significant difference in the performances of the two groups: there was a range of total mispronounced words in the high group of 0 to 4 with an average of 1.4; in the low group, the range was 1 to 17 with an average of 6.8. One conclusion that might be drawn from this evidence is simply that good writers have larger vocabularies than do poor ones. However, even if this were valid, I think these particular results have more significance than reflecting vocabulary size. I think that once again this is a situation where numbers may be misleading; since all readers, even the most highly skilled, may mispronounce words in a passage read orally for the first time, it would seem that the nature of the mispronunciation should take precedence over frequency in our analysis.

In her 1979 work, Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions, Constance Weaver proposed three possible perspectives the reader may have of his activity:

1. Reading means getting meaning from printed material (that is, reading means getting the underlying meaning, the deep structure)

2. Reading means identifying the words (that is, reading means getting the form, the surface structure)

3. Reading means identifying as many of the words as necessary in order to get meaning (that is, reading means using surface structure as a means for determining deep structure).[5]

As Weaver goes on to point out, the reader who sees the reading process only from the second perspective is one "who treats each word as if it were part of a word list."[6] The reader who acquired the third perspective, in contrast, is one who uses context--"syntactic and semantic both preceding and following"--to predict what is to come and to confirm or to correct what has already occurred.[7] The implications here are quite clear; a mispronounced word can have "degrees" of error; if the mispronunciation fits into the syntactic or semantic pattern of the sentence being read it is an error, but it suggests the reader is consciously trying to determine the deep structure of the sentence (reader three). However, if the reader's miscue is neither syntactically or semantically appropriate, it then

suggests the second view of reading. This is why I suggested above that nature rather than frequency of mispronunciation should be our concern.

The two groups of students I studied exhibited very different behavior in their uses of both preceding and following syntactic and semantic contexts when faced with an unfamiliar or confusing word. In the high group, although there were several mispronunciations, there was only a single instance of a reader producing a word that fit into none of the four contexts. There were several instances of initial mispronunciation that were almost immediately corrected, apparently when the reader's eye took in the following context. The low group, on the other hand, produced a number of errors that violated all four contexts; on one reading there were eleven such errors, and the group as a whole averaged slightly over three (counted among these were instances of the reader absolutely omitting a word or replacing it with a nonsense sound). This behavior, taken with this group's reactions to conventional uses of marks of punctuation, suggests that oral reading for them is largely a meaningless activity consisting of attempting to correctly pronounce words in a series. Keeping in mind the basis of the selection of the group members--their demonstrated incompetence as writers, not as readers--it is impossible to avoid seeing a connection between the two activities.

I would like to propose an hypothesis that seems to describe the particular relationship. To begin, it is obvious that reading, unlike speech, is an activity that is almost entirely acquired in a controlled environment. Materials are carefully prepared and selected, a hierarchy of presentation is carefully designed, teachers are given intense, specialized training in the teaching of reading. Few, if any, of these conditions exist as the child learns to talk, yet the success rate of learning to speak is much higher than that of learning to read. And if--as I propose--writing skills are simply a version of reading skills, it is absolutely predictable that the rate of achieving competency in writing is lower yet. If we examine a rather simple paradigm of most reading instruction, I believe we may see an explanation for this.

In such a paradigm, the hierarchy of skill acquisition follows the pattern of (1) associating particular sounds with certain letters and groups of letters, (2) transferring this knowledge to whole, simple words, (3) seeing such words in different sentence patterns used in simple narratives. To this point almost all the reading has been oral, but the next steps--(4) internalizing the sounds, i.e., reading "silently", and (5) identifying "main ideas" (and, in the literature class, "hidden meanings")--demand two major shifts in assumption of the student. The first is that it is now assumed that oral

reading is bad reading; it is at this point that reading rate, which presumably should be much greater than that possible in oral reading, begins to be stressed and tested. The second is a firm establishment of the concept of language, at least written language, as curtain or veil rather than as tool. I believe that these two assumptions combine to produce incompetency in writing.

The shift from oral to silent reading is of major importance in that written language, which the student first perceived as a symbolic system representing sound, is now to be treated as a symbolic system representing sense. The student who makes this switch in theory successfully learns to see word clusters rather than individual words or letters and to translate these clusters directly into sense units. One result is that reading rate jumps enormously; a second result is likely to be the second assumption mentioned above: written language begins to be seen as an obscuring device, a curtain or veil, behind which meaning lurks, waiting to be discovered. Written language becomes an adversary to be "tackled" or "dealt with" or "mastered" (all revealing instrumental metaphors used in English classes). The concept of writing as tool, as meaning, certainly as process is lost. I suspect this training helps explain the frustrating dichotomy between oral fluency and scribal dysfunction we often observe in beginning writers; they have never been taught that

oral language is the enemy, so they continue to make and enjoy puns, wordplays, and catchy phrases orally. I also suspect that this training helps explain students' antipathy toward and inability to read almost all written poetry--the most extreme use of writing in which sound, rhythm, and language as tool are found. The major problem with the sort of reading acquired in steps four and five is that it does not transfer to writing; my contention is that we write oral reading. While some of my colleagues object to my use of the word hearing to describe the mental activity that goes on as we write, I am convinced that, at least metaphorically, it is the most accurate term to choose. As I write these sentences, even though my lips are not moving, I am quite conscious of the sound the words I am writing would make if they were read aloud. To extend this recognition one step further, I am convinced that the competent writer writes in the same way he reads aloud, using preceding syntactic and semantic context to project meaning, word choice, and punctuation that will follow.

If this is a valid concept of scribal activity, it helps explain many problems, both major and minor, experienced by all writers. For instance, we have all had the experience of proofreading a piece of our own writing only to discover that we have either omitted or repeated a word. Such errors would seem to suggest that we are "hearing" faster than we are recording--

that we are anticipating context beyond the point at which our pen is working. On a more important level, this would also seem to explain the problems many students have with rule transfer; they seem to exhibit mastery of rule concept, but fail repeatedly to apply the concepts to their own writing. As I write, I am certainly not thinking introductory adverbial clause comma subject (pronoun) verb adverb (neg.) verb. . . . No writer does. Yet, if the reader's development stops at level two described by Weaver, this is what the act of writing approximates. Consequently, gross errors in diction, in punctuation, in syntax pass unnoticed because the writer "hears" nothing as she writes; writing becomes list making where preceding context is ignored and does nothing to shape what follows. This also explains student inability to deal with sophistications such as written irony, which is based upon the reversal of expectation. Another problem too often encountered is that of the student who has mastered simple conventions of surface structure, but whose writing is trite and bland to the point of ennui. Such a student has no concept of written language as tool, merely as a noxious activity to be done over and over, upon command, in a rigidly prescribed fashion. Such students are usually amused, annoyed, or bewildered if the instructor sees such writing as an accurate record of what the student really thinks or feels or knows.

A corollary suggested by the concept of writing-as-oral-reading is the notion of writing as discovery. Although many competent writers use broad outlines or sketchy plans to organize the general direction of their work, I have never encountered one--outside the English classroom--who uses the sort of carefully detailed plan or outline, filled with Roman numerals and capital letters, etc., so often stressed in composition courses. Competent writers realize that they do not know precisely what they will write; they discover it as they write, as the contexts they create lead them in certain directions.

Still another concern, which I find especially interesting, is the nature of the relationship between the writer and her audience. Much like the traditional exercises in outlines, the traditional concept of audience is based upon analysis of some real or hypothetical pre-reading audience. I have addressed myself to the unfortunate stereotyping encouraged by this approach in another essay; of importance here is that the skilled reader does not always read in the same role: for instance, we are not the same reader when we read Ian Fleming as when we read Milton.[8] Why not? Obviously because we react differently to contexts, to established expectations, to explicit and implicit value systems. Neither must we, as writers, always play the same role. When we "listen" to what we write as we write it, we become the reader that is being created by our use

of written language. Therefore, the analysis of pre-reading audience is much less important than an investigation of why we become who we do as we read a particular piece of writing. The beginning writer, as a result of such analysis, becomes much more conscious of the very real activity that even silent reading entails and becomes much more conscious of his own part as the creator--rather than analyst--of audience. Of equal importance here is the possible fulfillment of the requirement for immediate reinforcement of desired behavior stressed so heavily in behavioral learning theory.

Teachers of composition have recognized for some time that allowing a lapse of days between the student's writing a paper and his seeing the instructor's response to it is not a desirable situation. However, even the most dedicated reader of papers can not return them, with his response, for at least twenty-four hours. This need for immediacy of reaction and reinforcement led Zoellner to propose a composition classroom in which students wrote on large pads of newsprint and got immediate response either from peers or from the instructor.[9] This proposal disturbed me when I first encountered it over ten years ago, but I could then offer only vague explanations for my dissatisfaction. After considering writing-oral reading relationships, I have firmer grounds for objection. If the connection I have tried to establish is valid, then the writer, in hearing what

he writes, provides his own response and reinforcement. If he produces a lucid, symetrical, pleasing sentence, it sounds good; if not, it sounds bad--he frowns, mutters to himself, scratches out part or all of the offending effort and tries again. He is the reader over his shoulder.

To conclude, what I am suggesting is really quite simple, as I think good teaching theory should be. If good writers are skillful oral readers, as they seem to be, and if oral reading has the same features as the act of writing, as it seems to do, then it seems plausible that the person who sees oral reading only as identifying surface structures is likely to write in the same manner. This sort of writer-reader must change her perspective of written language; she must learn the role of preceding and following contexts in choosing among both syntactic and semantic alternatives. She must acquire the concept of written language as tool as well as the concept of reader and writer roles as active rather than passive. Consequently I feel that more study of rules "governing" surface structure is pointless drill; what is needed is a return to the point in the acquisition of reading skills at which the student's development stopped or took a wrong turn. This would mean extensive exercise in oral reading to acquire a sensitivity to the function of punctuation, to the impact of different syntactic structures, to the importance of even subtle changes in diction.[10] If, finally, the

writer must read over his own shoulder, if he must hear as he writes in order to determine the effectiveness of his product, he quite obviously must be able to read.

Notes

[1] "Using Research in Preparing to Teach Writing," English Journal, 67 (Jan., 1978), p. 85.

[2] "How Teachers Make Children Hate Reading," Redbook, 130 (Nov., 1967), pp. 50ff.

[3] Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 18.

[4] "Talk-Write: A Behavorial Pedagogy for Composition," CE, 30 (Jan., 1969), pp. 267-320.

[5] (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE), pp. 18-19.

[6] Weaver, p. 20.

[7] Weaver, p. 23.

[8] "Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?", CCC, 31 (May, 1980), pp. 221-26.

[9] Zoellner, pp. 299-300.

[10] It is also possible that oral reading samples could be used as a diagnostic instrument; however, given the large number of extant instruments which accurately identify lack of writing competence, this use is probably less important than the potential of oral reading training as a method of improving writing skills.